

Atlantic City Attractions Group puts focus on family entertainment in the city

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Nearly two dozen business and marketing leaders met Friday in Atlantic City to promote family entertainment in a city more popularly associated with gambling and drinking.

The newly formed Atlantic City Attractions Group will act as an advocate to larger organizations — such as the Atlantic City Alliance and the Casino Reinvestment and Development Authority — as the city's Tourism District and new marketing efforts develop.

Steel Pier owner Anthony Catanoso, who helped organize the meeting, said the city long has had a unique edge over other gaming resorts because of the beach and Boardwalk. He said it's time to use those features and other existing attractions in an effort to draw non-gaming revenue into the city.

"There's never been such a supportive and proactive attitude from the city, county and state government in the city in the 20 years I've been here," Catanoso said after the meeting. "They really have expanded their vocabulary from no to yes."

Representatives from businesses and organizations including the Rainforest Cafe, the Atlantic City Aquarium, Absecon Lighthouse, the Carlsbrooke Inn, the Chicken Bone Beach Historical Foundation, Richard Stockton College, Ripley's Believe It or Not and the Great American Trolley Co. talked about how to define the group's needs, mission and how to move forward.

Catanoso also briefly discussed the future of the Steel Pier, as construction on the first phase of a major renovation recently began. The three-year, three-phase overhaul of the pier, which Catanoso and other investors purchased from Trump Entertainment this past summer, will make at least 75 percent of the pier's attractions year-round family entertainment. There also will be a nightclub. Catanoso said more information about the pier's future will be released next month.

Atlantic City Alliance director Liza Cartmell was unable to attend the meeting because of a prior commitment, but said by phone afterward that she felt the group was a positive step forward in broadening the city's tourism reach.

"From my perspective, the more people that band together to try and work collectively to promote the opportunities here in town, I think that's a very very strong positive move and it will give me an opportunity to work with a more effective group of individuals putting together the broader marketing initiatives," she said. "I think it's great that somebody is really taking it upon themselves to be proactive."

The Alliance is the nonprofit and marketing arm of the CRDA and was created by the state Legislature earlier this year to launch a five-year plan that markets the city's tourism district.

Cartmell said the Alliance should have its new marketing partnership selected by the end of January, and workers should be in the process of developing a broadly based marketing campaign to promote the city and its attractions by February.

"I think the timing will work well," she said.

Catanoso said the next step for the group is for the various businesses to submit a letter of their goals and needs, which will be compiled into a larger letter to the Alliance.

Carla Caulk, the marketing and sales director for the Sheraton Atlantic City, told the group that one of the fastest and most effective ways to get an organized marketing effort started was for the businesses to share links on each others websites so tourists planning a visit would have an easier time finding additional activities.

“The more experiences for the guests, the happier they are,” Caulk said. “The sensory overload with the families is great because when they say, ‘Oh my gosh, there’s so much to do, I have to come back.’ That’s what we’re looking for. We’re looking for that leisure guest to come back.”

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